



Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine

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To cite this article: Zach Thomas (2018) Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine, Rock Music Studies, 5:3, 309-311, DOI: [10.1080/19401159.2018.1519901](https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2018.1519901)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2018.1519901>



Published online: 27 Sep 2018.



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Among them are the notable absentees “And I Love Her” and “Get Back,” which may not rank among the absolute top tier Beatles songs, but would surely not fall in the bottom half of the band’s catalog. By the same token, *Beatles for Sale*, often rated among the band’s weaker albums, seems remarkably well represented: six of its eight original songs appear here, giving it the highest percentage of any Beatles album on this list. And sandwiching “Let It Be” immediately between “Octopus’s Garden” and “I’m Down” is going to raise eyebrows, no matter how high or low in the countdown these three tracks appear. However, the author’s boldest move is his placement of the medley “Golden Slumbers”/“Carry That Weight”/“The End” as the Beatles’ second-finest song, and not only because it includes more than one song in a single selection.

From reading this book, and sometimes just by looking at the list, one can divine several of the author’s general preferences. For instance, he favors the band’s later material. He includes only one pre-1966 song in his top ten (a *Rubber Soul* track released in December 1965), even though he recognizes that

[t]rying to compare the early songs of artists with any longevity to their later output is always a difficult task [because] [t]he tendency is to make a knee-jerk reaction and say that the later stuff is better simply because it’s more complex and comes from a deeper well of experience (165).

Beviglia also has a higher opinion of the artist John Lennon than the melodist Paul McCartney. One can see that he recognizes that bias and can appreciate his attempt to mitigate it—unlike several authors who effusively praise McCartney or Lennon and diminish the other in their writings—but that preference remains apparent.

Counting Down the Beatles is an excellent example of this type of list book: imperfect but compelling, with an author who makes a nod to received wisdom but does not hold slavishly to it. Beviglia has a clear point of view, but takes time to meaningfully argue his points, and even when one disagrees with this book it remains engaging. *Counting Down the Beatles* is able to remind the reader, if it were necessary, just how good these songs are. That is the reason books like this, when handled with some competence and flair as in this volume, are always welcome.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2018.1420742>



Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine, by John Scanlan, London: Reaktion, 2016 ISBN: 978-1-78023-754-1 240 pp., \$22.50 (hardcover)

When even knowledgeable listeners discuss the Sex Pistols, it is difficult to avoid entertaining a degree of the lore so characteristic of the band’s location in musical discourse: the establishment of the subversive boutique SEX from which the group operated; the recruitment of John Lydon and Sid Vicious to enhance the band’s image; the exploitation and manipulation of the band by opportunistic manager Malcolm McLaren; EMI’s and A&M’s refusal to work with the Pistols, resulting in their subsequent collaboration with Virgin Records; the derailing of the band’s

potential by an implosion fueled by substances and violence. It is not that these narratives have no basis in fact; it is that they omit a variety of more complicated contexts that spawned the band. John Scanlan's *Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine* foregoes sensationalism and mythos and provides thorough documentation and historicity in their stead.

In addition to his impressive historical account, Scanlan threads a variety of analytical considerations into the book, thus endowing it with a sound intellectual basis. For instance, he investigates a broader disparity between reality and perception and delves into the indispensability of cultural memory. Of the former, he writes that "this gap between the reality and its representation – so at odds with the world we live in today, where the gap is non-existent – also added to the perception that the Sex Pistols had, by 1977 already entered the realms of myth" (15). The author does some important conceptual unpacking for cultural memory as well. He asserts that this memory is embodied by "the panoply of media artefacts, material objects and memoirs that feed into various forms of reanimation" (12). Examples the author provides of these are film documentaries, commemorative events, and exhibitions. In an embodiment of cultural memory and the reality/perception dichotomy, the author presents the reader with the idea that there were two Sex Pistols: manager Malcolm McLaren's and frontman John Lydon's. These two groups were an idea and a musical entity, respectively (223).

Of course, no discussion of the Pistols is complete without the perennially contentious figure Malcolm McLaren. Scanlan facilitates this by offering the reader an exciting glimpse into the emerging and residual ideological currents in England at the time. We discover the profound impact of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich – specifically *The Function of the Orgasm* and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* – upon McLaren and his fashion boutique. Reich's work helped to provide McLaren with notions of sexual liberation which would manifest in the fetish and BDSM clothing at SEX.

The author does not outrightly dismiss McLaren as a heartless manipulator, though; rather, he investigates McLaren's instigatory past as an art student who often organized sit-ins and protests. The reader sees into McLaren's artistic side as well. An art history student from a tailor family who was fascinated with clothing and appearance, McLaren seemed to be genuinely motivated by "a fascination with the unformed and the deformed, with making and breaking and doing it over and over and over again" (21). Scanlan also resists the urge to indulge "the implication that McLaren was merely an opportunist"; this default, he asserts, "ignores his real teenage engagement with popular culture" (31). McLaren had, after all, seen the Beatles and was a devout follower of the Rolling Stones and the Pretty Things (31).


As for the band members themselves, the book documents their initial run-ins and activities, all anchored by interviews and impressive visuals, including photographs and show fliers. One reads of guitarist Steve Jones's penchant for robbery which would cement him as an authentic bad boy. In a similar vein, drummer Paul Cook often participated in varying heists. Together, the two amassed a trove of gear. Various pieces of the loot would be sold to fund the band; others would be used in their live performances.

Although this is a book about the Sex Pistols, it is not a book about *just* the Sex Pistols. It lays out a historical framework in an unassuming, accessible way. One learns of the Teddy boys, hippies, and bleak economic climate in Britain at the time that all inspired more confrontational music and image. In a music scene that was dominated by pub rock and more often than not awash in a type of post-Beatles anaesthesia, the Pistols were the antithesis of "the prevailing easy-going, doped-out hippy ideal" (35). Scanlan documents the indispensability of the New York Dolls, whose sleazy image and musical naivete were of invaluable import for Malcolm McLaren and Steve Jones. We see, for instance, that the historical roots of something as assumed and par for the course as the disheveled, spiky haircut made famous by the Pistols was initiated by Richard Hell of the Heartbreakers, Television, and Voidoids. Cultural ephemera abound as well. Scanlan discloses the ins and outs of the two films that sought to document and narrativize the band – *Who Killed*

Bambi and *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. Additionally, he takes care to discuss McLaren's distaste with the Pistols' increasingly refined sound and the subsequent, mysterious release of early session recordings as a type of "alternative debut album" that would later be known as *Spunk* (203).

Poison in the Machine is anchored by a simple goal profound in its gifts to the reader. The author proceeds from the assumption that despite the ubiquitous forms of revisiting the Pistols' era we in the present often forget that the band completely "scandalized the population of a country that had, most remarkably of all, probably never even seen or heard them" (12). Perhaps we are even implicated in the possibility of the purported existence of two Sex Pistols. On one hand, we can lapse into the critical narrative that often dismisses the band as a mere fashion statement, its members simply puppets of a boutique owner, and its only danger visual and aural. On the other, we could, in the *modus operandi* of Scanlan's book, view the band as a group that caused a legitimate cultural rupture. One need only recall one of the many hard facts contained in the book: Scanlan allows us to see that numerous record pressing plants refused to handle the Pistols' music and that even after its official release *Nevermind the Bollocks* was banned in numerous record stores. Or perhaps the reader, learning of the physical assaults the band endured after the release of "God Save the Queen," can acknowledge that there existed a very real physical danger for this group that had been labeled anti-monarchists and a threat more pressing to the empire's morale than unemployment or dole queues. The author describes the Pistols as a peculiarly British phenomenon that sought to revive musical danger and swagger. This notwithstanding, their influence was not merely negative or dangerous. The book helps us understand their substantial responsibility for the creative petri dish that would spawn such giants as the Clash, Siouxsie Sioux and the Banshees, and the Buzzcocks.

Poison in the Machine is an invitation for readers to question – what we know and what we think we know about the Sex Pistols, their importance, and their various contributions – to question narratives of the band as a mere fashion statement or an empty display of nihilism and self-destruction. Regardless of the conclusion at which the reader arrives, the book demonstrates that "there is *before the Sex Pistols*, and there is *after the Sex Pistols*" (9).

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2018.1519901>

